

Editorial

The orthodontic “Oktober” fest!

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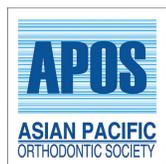
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2020 was planned to be a landmark celebration for the specialty of orthodontics – that promised a global “Smile Flag” journey to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of the “World Federation of Orthodontists,” the 9th International Orthodontic Conference and the 12th Asian Pacific Orthodontic Conference, all coinciding with the 79th annual meeting of the Japanese Orthodontic Society. All of it – in Yokohama, Japan in October 2020. Colleagues and speakers had made elaborate travel plans and were looking forward to this event until new terms were introduced into our lexicon! They are “social distancing,” “travel restrictions,” and “the new normal.”

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected lives and systems globally. As a consequence, professional associations all around the world have been cancelling, reformatting, or postponing their gatherings. There have been considerable concerns about meetings in general and most organizations have introduced web-based learning modules as an effective replacement for previously planned physically convened meetings. In the absence of regulations, policies and benchmarks for web-meetings, many new social media sites have mushroomed that host webinars almost every day – “death by webinar,” is a popular #hashtag on social media today! The value of the virtual world has sky-rocketed faster than ever before!

So, where does this phenomenon leave our face-to-face conferences? Conferences have long been the gold standard for exchanging ideas and strengthening professional relationships, both in practice and academia. Sure, they can be a bit stuffy, but gathering people in the same room has measurable benefits. A study in the technology sector, found that scientific collaborations that came out of conference meetings were “more novel, cross-disciplinary, and more frequently cited than projects between two researchers at the same institution.” Do we have enough orthodontic examples of this phenomenon? I’m sure we do.

There is however another side to the story. Often, conferences can be lackluster: People gather in hotel ballrooms or convention centers, sit in stiff chairs, and watch a series of sometimes unsurprising talks and panel discussions. Many conferences end up being self-congratulatory echo chambers rather than forums for new knowledge where scientific programs are often gracious in time allocation to courtesy-speakers, a term I recently learnt! Events hosted by our orthodontic industry partners have not created much professional disruption either. Instead, these events have become high-production spectacles as every industry emulates Steve Jobs and his commercial-style launch conferences. Most of these events are not cheap, either; we are not just talking about registration fees. The cost of travel and the inevitably overpriced conference hotel rooms add to revenues of the multi- billion-dollar conference organization industry.

So will the new forced reality, be a probable dawn of a new convention model? Que sera sera. What could the future of an online orthodontic conference look like? In a utopian virtual environment: A simple, intuitive platform with a mobile phone app more akin to a social networking site than a

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typical conference app. Speakers beaming in from all over the world, slashing travel and environmental costs. Participants joining on their phones, able to engage fully without being chained to their computers all day – with possible on demand content too, that can be viewed as per the attendees’ convenience. There could be streaming participant-to-participant interaction that eases awkwardness and yields better returns. Possible real-time participant-to-speaker feedback that empowers speakers to give their best performances. And, finally, better monetization tools for conference organizers—often the *unsung heroes*—this enable them to become more cost effective by eliminating burdens like venues, chairs, lighting, insurance, and allowing a variety of ticket upsells. So, in simple words: a *Facebook, Book-my Show, Zoom, Research-Gate and Linked-in*, all rolled into one!

The AAO Annual Session was a revelation! The manner in which the American Association of Orthodontists put together a virtual event in such a short duration, to embrace a changed circumstance – is an inspirational story for the profession! I loved being a part of this landmark event, where a lot of us were probably initially unsure of what to expect! A feature that I had never witnessed before was a “virtual happy hour!” Since then, I’ve been a part of quite a few “BYO (Bring your own) wine” virtual social meetings with close fraternal friends and colleagues from around the globe! Do we miss the warm hugs? Of course, we do! Do we miss the camaraderie and friendly banter at these interactions? Probably not!

As more conferences get cancelled or moved online, organizers are still exploring emerging platforms as an alternative to the boring old webinar. There is still uncertainty over future

meetings this year or the early part of next year—but a piece of news that was really encouraging is the announcement made by the organizers of the *9th International Orthodontic Congress-Yokohama* to have a virtual meeting starting 4th October this year. Registrations for this meeting start July and details will be available at <http://www.wfo2020yokohama.org>. This will be the first ever virtual meeting in orthodontics of this magnitude. Close to 100 speakers from all over the world, 800 clinical and research posters from orthodontists and residents (*a resident forum co-hosted by the APOS*), which have been peer-reviewed, a global orthodontic Boards symposium, the APOS Trends awards session, and an anticipated attendance of 10,000+ delegates is truly going to make 2020 momentous, symbolizing how the specialty of orthodontics embraced change, and adapted to altered circumstances in time. “As we move into a new era, I am confident and highly optimistic that our virtual 9th IOC will be a lasting footprint in our new educational environment. Many of you will, in the future, be able to say – “yes I am pleased I was part of that” says Dr Allan R. Thom-President of the *World Federation of Orthodontists*.

I’m excited about how colleagues from around the world will interact in a world that is not “divided by boundaries, borders, and passports” and united by just their love for orthodontics! This October, the “orthodontic world” will unite when colleagues “smile” at each other through their screens – a fest indeed!

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